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ABSTRACT

Reading disability is described in this paper as a relative state that will appear different across societies and over the years. It is noted that researchers who claim that their objective is to find methods and materials to make remedial reading unnecessary are unrealistic. An overview of the Danish educational system and society during the last several decades is provided to illustrate how reading needs have increased. Some of the changes in Denmark that are noted include the increasing numbers of students entering higher levels of education, the increased lending of books, and the increased use of printed text in books, newspapers, magazines, advertising papers, and even subtitles on television. It is concluded that there is not one instructional method or material that will work at all times with all students and that an emphasis must be placed on kindergarten through grade 12 reading instruction to cope with some of the changing needs of readers. (MKM)

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The continued Need for Effective Remedial Reading Programs.

Speaker: Mogens Jansen,
The Danish Institute for Educational Research

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"It is all reading"
- but what is reading?

The 4-year old reads pictures. The 9-year old reads texts on the TV. The 11-year old reads children's books. The 13-year old reads magazines, and the 16-year old reads in the book of instructions about how to repair something. The 19-year old sits for examinations and prepares him- or herself by reading.

This is what it looks like at my place.

These children and young people are of different ages; the have quite different backgrounds. But they all "read".

We observe that they read. We see how they read. We notice what they read - and we ask ourselves, "Is their 'reading' in fact the same thing?

We speak of reading and we think of a person reading the newspaper or a poem. Maybe we speak of reading an informative label or a section of an Act. We read what it says on the meter of the petrol pump; and we read an invitation for a meeting.

It is all reading. At least we use the same word for it. But there are so many different elements in the different reading situations that it is probably incorrect to use a common word. Reading is, no doubt, a concept which should be conceptually broken up.

And not only are there differences between one person and another and between one situation and another. - There are also very great differences between one decade and the next.

When researchers proclaim that their object is to find methods and materials to make remedial reading unnecessary, their idealistic conceptions must be accepted.

However, to be a disabled reader is a relative state. The so-called normal reading instruction becomes more demanding, because it has to comply with new demands for a still higher standard of reading. But that means a further challenge to those who work out reading programs.

In this way a bettered instruction involves an ever-increasing need for remedial reading programs for the weakest pupils.

When we speak of a pupil - or a teacher, or a school - "failing in reading", we base this judgment on the current demands of society.

This is not only true in cases of failure in relation to remedial reading programs, but also in many other situations.

I do not decline wishes of clear definitions. An absolute definition of physical and mental handicaps is useful in some cases. Perhaps it is also advisable, when a treatment has to be decided or when a policy of education has to be laid down.

However, considering the special educational needs of children, young and older people, one should not forget that there are two sides to every handicap:

The competence of the pupil at this point and

society's view of this competence.

From comparative reading research we know that some societies assign greater importance to the learning and teaching of reading than others: For example, John Downing has proved the U.S.A. to be a country which gives top priority to the learning and teaching of reading.

If an American child does not reach a certain level by the age of 6-7, he or she is likely to be classified as a disabled reader, - it is said.

I remember a time, when I was lecturing at a university in England. One day the students and I visited a school for pupils with different handicaps. All of them were "to some degree deficient in intelligence", as we would put it in my country. In that school I was faced with a problem:

A girl of about 6 who had a badly reduced vision was working via a television screen in order to learn not only letters, but also words. It was extremely difficult for her.

The teacher's work was impressive, and the girl's work was even more amazing.

At lunch the teacher asked me, "What would <u>you</u> have suggested in order to faciliate the instruction of the girl? - If she had been a Danish girl, and you had been responsible - what would your suggestion have been?"

"It is hard to say," was my comment. Should I say that 'if the girl had gone to school in Denmark, she would in a Danish

school for normal children not yet have seen very many words and letters, and she would certainly not have started on an instruction. And if she had gone to a Danish special school, she would surely not have started an instruction'?

By this I want to point out how much the reading situation can differ from one country to another. In England there was a strong demand for an effective remedial reading program for this girl - and for other pupils who went to this special school.

If she had grown up in an industrially underdeveloped country, she would not have been registered as a disabled reader.

If she had grown up in my country, she would not either have been registered as such.

In the following I shall try and describe how we - in some parts of the Danish educational system - become more and more depressed, while at the same time exactly our reading instruction proves more and more successful

- because the need for effective remedial reading programs is steadily increasing.

So, please bear in mind that in the following I speak from a special Danish point of view. This is, of course, not the best angle of incidence to the school system of an entirely different country; but maybe it will be possible to see the defects and drawbacks with the neighbour, and maybe light will thus be shed on different sides in your own country.

In Denmark we have already for a couple of generations been living in a decidedly literate society.

Not only the book-learning educations presuppose a rather high reading competence in the children and young people. Also many further educations - and not all alone the book-learning further educations - presuppose a high reading competence.

We also read when shopping. The goods are packed and placed in such a way that their contents, their prices, their durability etc. can be read.

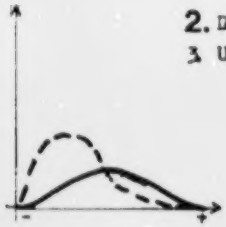
We read when approaching public authorities.

In Denmark we also often read when watching the TV, since about 40% of our TV programs are <u>not</u> in spoken Danish and therefore have subtitles. For our youngest readers in school, the 7-9-year-old, this consitutes a rather effective "reading-machine". - But that is quite another matter.

'Not-being-able-to-read' has become a severe handicap. The demands are increasing, especially the demands for the ability to read.

Let us look into this and see how our instruction in reading is reflected through a comparison between school children of the last 20 years and their parents - and the respective reading of these two groups:

A



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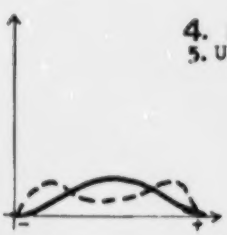

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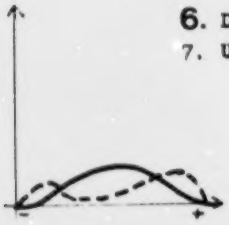

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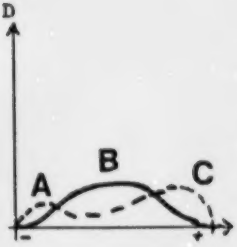
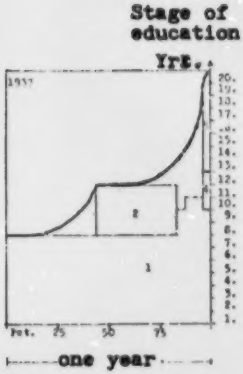
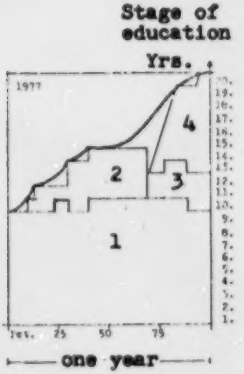


This has been pointed out so often. It is no longer news.

Now let us consider this on the background of the figures C and D -





1 Elementary School
2 Basic education, trade and industry
3 "Gymnasium" - College
4 Universities

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In other words, we must conclude, among other things that pupils have been introduced into the ordinary school who would not have belonged there a generation ago.

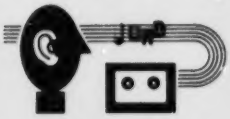
For these pupils effective remedial reading programs are needed - as they were before - only now the pupils are compared with other pupils who have become better.

The demands have increased - also the demands on 'the others'.

But could we not manage many things without reading
1) in our educations?
2) in our spare time?
3) in our working life?
4) and as citizens?

Is the old reading situation - the individual with the book - really the only conceivable one?

No, we can use the cassette tape.



We can listen to many texts; we can combine the cassette tape with the book; we can combine it with slides; we can supplement the book with the tape.

There are incredibly many possibilities of combination, and by now all of them are used to some extent.

But so far there is no machine, no educational instrument capable of giving information which the individual can administer him- or herself, to the same degree as the book is capable of doing it - via reading.

New electronic aids gave new sound and picture experiences - for better or worse:

In Denmark the generation of 1960 has become the generation who grew up with a transistor radio beside the cradle. Now they have all become adults in an eternal musical grind where there is always noise and where nobody is listening.

In my part of the world TV satellite transmissions from many different language areas are on their way.

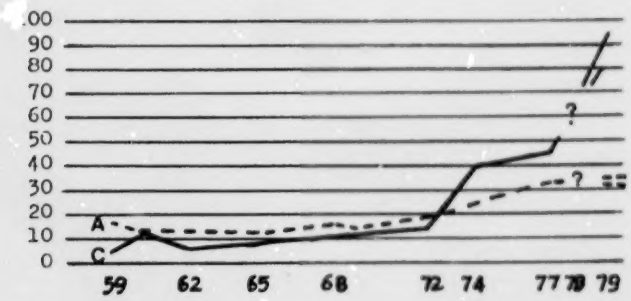
The generation to be born now will grow up as 'the satellite generation' with the thousand different, flickering pictorial impressions accompanied by English, German, French, Russian, and hopefully Scandinavian speech.

And all this is primarily administered by others,
and the individual can listen
- and to a limited extent choose
whether he or she wants to watch or to switch off.
But the reading texts we can go and get ourselves. When we

<u>are able to read, we are independent of our teachers, our parents, and television</u>.

Incidentally, the text is now also being turned into electronics. But that is another matter.

Let me find a situation showing clearly that being a bad reader - or a good reader for that matter - is something relative:



The figure shows the number of books issued from the libraries in Denmark, school libraries as well as public libraries.

When a systematic registrations was started in the late fifties, the adult borrowers took out between 10 and 20 million books a year every year up to 70.

In the course of 20 years the number has almost doubled. (The method of registration was changed in 1978, and we cannot make an exact comparison. We can choose to compare two figures, respectively, now with one figure at that time). Gone up 17 - 33 mio.

But what can be seen is that the adult lending has encreased strongly; in fact, it has nearly doubled in the course of less than a generation.

How about the children?

Well, it appears that in the early seventies there is a break when the lending rose sharply.

Why was that?

Well, 3 - 4 years earlier permission had been granted by the authorities to extend the school libraries. And now the results were showing up.

In 1975 a school reform was introduced calling for a more individualized teaching. The results of this were seen a few years later, among other things via these figures.

"But it is good, then," you might say.

Well.

In 1960 I was teaching a class of first-graders. And I remember telling the parents of my pupils that from now on there would be less need for remedial reading programs. Because the book lending by children between 8 and 13 amounted to almost the total number of books taken out by the rest of the population!

I was proud, and the parents were surprised.

The number of 8 - 13 year-old pupils is unchanged from that time. But now they read eight times as much!

A pupil of to-day, 20 years later, who reads the same number of books as did my advanced pupils at that time, is no particularly good reader. He or she may even run a risk of becoming a disabled reader compared with his or her classmates.

Let us have a look at these figures. I have two statements - one is from about 1970, and the latest is from 1978-79:

	1970 %	1978
0-6 YEAR-OLD ¤	36 →	37
7-11 -	70 →	95
12-15 -	75 →	98
ADULTS	40 →	48

¤ not day-care centres etc.

What percentage of the age groups comes regularly to the libraries? (30-40 visits a year).

Are the borrowers satisfied with the library?

If all public institutions could display the same percentages of satisfactin as the libraries, Denmark would - almost - be a forecourt to Utopia.

As a whole, satisfaction is the predominant impression. The strongest dissatisfaction is expressed by the group of borrowers who take out most books, namely the 12 - 15 year-old. Both boys and girls from this group visit the library between once a week and once a month.

Who do not visit the library?

The well-educated are those who take out most books from the library. It is the socially relatively strong groups who are familiar with the library and who use it. But the number of library users exceeds them by far.

Those who are "tired" do not go to the library. Perhaps the libraries do not offer them enough? - if they offer them anything at all.

Exactly the well-educated who carry a great deal of the public debate ought to consider, whether a wider diffusion of many of the possibilities of society could not take place via, among other things, a wider range of offers from the libraries. I am not speaking of the children's comics (which are also taken out by adults); that debate is over. Comics will not give a wider range of offers on the library shelves.

But in the libraries there are too little of that kind of books, which all those who are "non-reading" might be able to read so relatively easily that they would get something out of it.

It is the adult disabled readers who are unable to utilize the libraries.

The children's use of the libraries has increased very strongly, mainly due to the efforts from the school and the teachers of Danish, but also due to the much wider offer of easily read literature which is now available in both school and children's libraries. The joint efforts from the teachers of Danish, the school librarians and the children's librarians now prove themselves:

15 years ago we said that the group of 12-13 year-old had begun to move out of the library; for the library did not have a great deal more for them to read without difficulty or great difficulty.

Now the 15 - 16 year-old continue as borrowers, because there are at least some books in the libraries which they can manage to read, and which they do not at all find totally trivial in their contents.

But it is not good enough. - There is still one (mixed) group that does not yet belong to the borrowers.

And it is easy to see the new generation gap which is approaching here.

The ideal would be for the total library system to aim at the whole width of the population with regard to reading competence.

There ought to be easy books and difficult books with the same contents on the same subjects. In cases where the printed text was not accessible enough to everyone, there should be tapes and pictorial information to the same extent. But this is Utopia in a small language area like mine.

Whether we like it or not, the society in which I live is actually functioning via the printed text. And this to a degree which our parents could never have imagined and which we are not fully aware of ourselves.

- Even if we leave books out of account, and

even if we pretended that newspapers and journals did not exist,

there would still be the weekly, the fortnightly, and the monthly magazines,

there would be printed matters, advertising papers and many other reading matters of all kinds, distributed by private firms, municipal offices and State institutions.

Our society is based on texts to such an extent that we do not hesitate to subtitle our TV, because "everybody is able to read".

When preparing the Danish version of English reading terms to be included in IRA's book of reading terms we found that, for

example, we do not have a word in Danish for "literate".

We do have a word for illiterate;

but we have no word for being literate. We could construct such a word; but we had no use for it, until the E.E.C. and Unesco asked us to state the number of illiterates in Denmark. - But this is, of course, another and much more funny story.

However, it is an absolutely serious matter that there are groups of disabled readers. And there are new groups:

It is not only the financially and socially weak groups which hold disabled readers. And not only these children and young people are going to suffer - even if there are too many children and young people from the weakest of these groups.

It is not only the boys who will pay - even if there are too many boys there.

It is not only the children and young people without any fixed points in their lives - even if there are too many of those pupils here.

And not all of those groups have been mentioned here.

There is a risk that all those who are disabled readers will be pushed away a little, and that is a hundred percent unacceptable.

I see this as the greatest risk by far in our school.

It is not the school that makes theoretical ecucations.

It is our society demanding more and more theoretical educations and more and more theoretical elements in many educations.

No doubt, we, as teachers, find it of the greatest importance that the children and young people - and also we ourselves in the later educations - should learn to read as well as possible, as varied as possible and as much as possible, exactly with a view to the educations - and with the working life as the object. Reading is much used within much working life.

Not less important is is to point out that reading is needed in many spare-time situations.

In our family life, within our private world, reading is often needed too.

And in our lives as citizens in so complex society as the present one, reading is needed.

Through a sincere commitment,
based on great knowledge,
through research or
via experience
many teachers have succeeded in creating exactly the right program to do away with reading dificulties.

It is highly probable that they are right - in their class that year!

At other places other classes appear with slightly different qualifications - thus needing slightly different programs.

At another time - perhaps in 10 years - other pupils will face another society and will need other programs.

My personal conclusion is that the methods of teaching reading - including the remedial reading programs - which were worked out 15 years ago for pupils, children, young people and adults - could possibly be applied - to a certain degree.

However, they could not be applied just like that - to-day in a different situation.

Some of the materials used at that time can still be used; others will have to be developed.

In Denmark we have more or less the same methods as are known in the USA.

To me it looks, as if every method throws off its reading disabled pupils - many or few.

"The right method" may exist
in certain periods
for the individual child
in certain situations.

The effective remedial reading program may exist in certain periods for the individual child in certain situations.

But it does not continue to exist, if it is not adjusted - maybe even much adjusted.

I was there as a teacher, when the educational machines were launched.

I remember the great promises to the effect that now "The really effective Remedial Program" or "The great Pumpkin" had arrived.

Many of us were pleased with the programmed promises - some were sceptical.

I was among those teachers who came out strong for flash cards,

for phonics,

for new phonics,

for spelling,

for drill,

for Language Experience Approach and similar methods, and they have all been more or less efficient. Often they have conveyed good news to the reading development.

To me, the beginning instruction in reading has been essential all the time, because it forms the basis.

We know that.

However good it is - it is inadequate, because it is only a beginning. A reading instruction which does not involve "from K to 12" is inadequate. A teaching method in reading which does not include all the years is too short in its design.

The discussion about it is very characteristic of the period.

Unbelievably many things are dependant on pupils, teachers, parents and materials - and on the society in which the reading program has to function.

I have experienced the "back-to-basis-movements".

I have listened to the demands for minimum competences. I remember them from 1950, and now they are here again - in my country.

In this welter of impressions there has not in my country been produced a reading method adequate at every time and for every pupil.

More and more handicapped pupils are integrated in the normal classes. This has been humanly necessary - and often humanly enriching.

Occasionally it is a strain, and at any rate it still represents a challenge to us.

It complicates our workday, and it should be complicated. It is.

Reading instruction to me is a never-ending race.

A race between

reaching the greatest possible number of pupils in the best possible way through effective remedial reading programs

and

inadequacy and disaster.

We did not find the philosopher's stone when we looked for the effective remedial reading program.

And if we had found the philosopher's stone, we might not have realized that it was the one.

It is like the other stones we find on the beach.

We see that it shines. We pick it up, and we are happy with it.

We can take it home.

Later it looks like the other stones and pebbles. But we can use it all the same. Still, it is not the solution

- and it is nothing without us and without people to build from it.